

Cystitis

Cystitis or inflammation of the bladder is a common and distressing problem. Women have a 30% chance of having cystitis at some time in their lives, with one in five suffering from recurrent episodes.

What causes cystitis?

Urine in the bladder is usually germ free. However, sometimes germs can pass up the tube into the bladder (urethra) from the rectal area. This causes more than 95% of urinary tract infections.

Because the urethra in women is shorter than in men, the risk of urinary tract infections is greater in women.

What increases the risk of infection?

Sexual intercourse

Women have a seven times greater chance of getting a urinary tract infection if they are sexually active.

Toilet hygiene

Wiping from front to back reduces the risk of infection (wiping the other way is a common cause of infection in young girls).

Drinking too little fluid

Strong urine can act as an irritant.

Incorrect use of tampons and contraceptive diaphragms.

Pregnancy

Urinary tract infections can cause problems for the mother and her unborn baby. It is particularly important to get treatment as early as possible during pregnancy.

Vaginal irritants

Perfumed soaps, toiletries and spermicidal gels may act as irritants.

Menopause

The lack of oestrogen leads to a thinning of the tissues around the bladder, increasing the risk of infection.

Some chronic illnesses such as diabetes.

Physical problems

Some women have problems that make them more likely to get urinary tract infections.

What are the signs of infection?

The most common signs are:

- A burning pain when passing urine;
- A frequent and urgent desire to pass urine;
- Difficulty passing urine.

Other signs include:

- Low back pain,
- Bladder pain,
- Cloudy, smelly or blood stained urine.

If these signs persist for more than 24 hours it is important to ask your doctor to check your urine. Sometimes other diseases can mimic these symptoms.

More serious urinary tract infection may occur if cystitis is left untreated. It can cause fever and shivers, loin pain and abdominal pain. In this situation urgent treatment is needed to avoid kidney damage.

What should you do if you have symptoms?

- Drink plenty of water (2-3 litres a day).
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol, and acidic or spicy foods, as these may increase symptoms.

If symptoms persist for 24 hours see your doctor who will test your urine and prescribe antibiotics if necessary.

Preventing recurrent infections

There are some helpful strategies that may reduce the frequency of urinary tract infections.

- Maintain a high fluid intake, especially in hot weather.
- When you go to the toilet, ensure you completely empty your bladder.
- Empty your bladder before and after sexual intercourse.
- Wear cotton underwear and loose clothing.
- Change out of swimming costumes and leotards as soon as practical.
- Check the fit of contraceptive diaphragms or use alternative forms of contraception. Remove the diaphragm as soon as it is safe to do so after intercourse.
- Studies show a daily intake of cranberry juice or extract helps prevent urinary tract infection.